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SUBJECT: Senator Inhofe's Visit to Serbia

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Senator James M. Inhofe's visit to Belgrade 27 May occurred in the aftermath of Montenegro's referendum and the conclusion of the fifth round of Vienna talks on Kosovo status issues. In meetings with President Tadic, FONMIN Draskovic, DEFMIN Stankovic, and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ponos, the Senator was afforded an opportunity to assess the Serbian leadership's reaction to Montenegrin independence as well as Kosovo, Serbia's commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, and political and defense reform. End summary.

Tadic: Preserving Democratic Serbia

¶2. (SBU) Tadic focused in his discussions on the difficult decisions that Serbia faces in months ahead on such key issues as Kosovo final status, the dissolution of the SaM State Union, ICTY compliance, defense reform, and generally accelerating Euro-Atlantic Security integration. Tadic promised Serbia's relations with Montenegro would center on common economic and security interests. He said Serbia would respect the will of the Montenegrin people and an independence outcome, although he was skeptical of Montenegro's economic future and saw the need for intrinsic political and security links with Belgrade. On ICTY, Tadic sought to assure the Senator of the Serbian government's political will to extradite Mladic and that the issue was mostly a technical problem. With regards to Kosovo, Tadic promised that as a co-chair of Serbia's negotiating team he would strive to be constructive in the status negotiations, but was constrained by the Serbian constitution that

obliged him to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia. He also offered reassurances that Serbian armed forces would remain a security partner with KFOR.

Taking Charge of the Armed Forces

13. (SBU) Responding to the Senator's inquiry, Tadic in no uncertain terms asserted that he was in charge of the Armed Forces, adding that he would continue to champion defense reform and press for Serbia's entry into PFP as well as the strengthening of Serbia's bilateral military relationship with the United States. Tadic said he supported signing bilateral agreements such as the SOFA and Article 98. He affirmed his commitment to do more on defense reform, promising to expend more political capital and focus on defense policy regardless of the fact that people in his own party did not see defense as such a priority issue.

Draskovic: A Voice in the Wilderness

14. (SBU) FONMIN Draskovic remained outspoken on Serbia's need to fulfill its international obligations to The Hague, lamenting that Serbia was a victim of one individual, Mladic, and that Prime Minister Kostunica's government - and in particular the unreformed security services - have failed his nation. Draskovic stated that PFP membership would have a positive and stabilizing effect on democratic Serbia.

15. (SBU) On Kosovo, Draskovic rearticulated his

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position on Kosovo final status, arguing for a delay of at least 3-4 years before consideration of Kosovo independence -- after Pristina had proven that it could protect the rights of the Serb minority. He cautioned that Kosovar Albanians should not be rewarded with independence unless standards are achieved, adding that he would push the GoS to continue engaging responsibly on decentralization and protection of religious sites.

Stankovic: Staying on Track

16. (SBU) DEFMIN Stankovic reaffirmed the MoD's commitment to defense reform and an amicable split with Montenegro over military assets. He confirmed to the Senator his understanding that the President of Serbia is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Stankovic offered assurances that he would keep defense reform on track and stated that down-sizing the force and the disposal of military property would be this year's primary resource challenges. Additionally, the MoD and General Staff have concluded their Strategic Defense Review Process and allegedly were prepared to sign a SOFA. Stankovic asserted his support for both of these initiatives.

Ponos: Reformist Vision

17. (SBU) General Ponos was emphatic about the Serbian armed forces' strategic orientation on PFP entry and eventual NATO membership. Ponos outlined the various challenges to reach that

goal ? Personnel reductions to an end strength of 27,000 from the current 62,000, major base reductions and closings, and the implementation of a modern force structure. Most importantly, Ponos stated that changing the mindset of the armed forces, and especially the officer corps, was the main challenge.

18. (SBU) While Mladic conditionality continued to block Serbian participation in PfP, Ponos noted there were numerous opportunities for promoting Euro-Atlantic integration that remained untapped. At the forefront of these was the bilateral military relationship with the United States. Ponos felt that the State Partnership Program (SPP), IMET and FMF were all programs the Serbian armed forces could benefit greatly from. He expressed hope that the Serbian government would be ready to sign a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in the near future so that SPP could begin. IMET, in particular, would immeasurably contribute to the Euro-Atlantic security integration of the Serbian armed forces as well as lead to a professional force able to participate as full security partner with NATO and the United States.

19. (SBU) The Senator responded that he intended to add an amendment to the current Defense Authorization bill that would allow for waivers for IMET for certain countries, including Serbia and Montenegro. Senator Inhofe did not have the opportunity to see this message prior to his departure.

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